

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 4, No 2 (2019)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy SI: Bioethics and the Holocaust



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doi: [10.12681/cjp.21075](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.21075)

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To cite this article:

Silvestri, E. (2019). Lebensunwertes Leben: Roots and Memory of Aktion T4. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 4(2), 65–82. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.21075>

Lebensunwertes Leben: Roots and Memory of Aktion T4

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Abstract

What the Nazis called Aktion T4 was a euthanasia program, officially started on August 18th, 1939. The registration operations for individuals with physical or mental handicaps were followed by forced sterilization and transfer to clinics organized to kill. In this article, I try to explain the mechanisms that allowed the memory of Aktion T4 to be preserved and passed from one generation to the next; memories of the “merciful death” of approximately 70,000 “lives unworthy of life,” that find themselves embedded in family records and family history. In the first section, I summarize the discussion that resulted from the theories of Charles Darwin and Francis Galton. Even if those theories do not in any way allude to the consequences that we have witnessed decades after their publication, they started a debate about the value of life and the legitimacy of human intervention in the selection of hereditary character traits, as well as the concept of race and the different methods and forms of theories and eugenics that were later adopted in Europe and in the United States. In the case of Germany, translated into Rassenhygiene, those concepts flowed into the Nazi project of purification of the German people. Through interviews with families who had a relative interned in one of the program's clinics spread across the Reich territory between 1939 and 1945, I investigate the evolution and passage of memories stored within the family sphere, paying attention to the generational steps and processes of trauma. These stories are born from a complicated process of reconstructing these memories via interviews. Their recollections were full of painful silences and negations, similar to the thought process which led the victims to live in a condition that they could not understand, and separated them from the world before they were each made to face a solitary death, far from any contact with their families. The trauma that I analyze concerns actions that had been carried out by previous generations; in the majority of cases, younger generations were not aware of the destiny of their murdered relatives and therefore tried to rebuild the stories of people who they never had the opportunity to meet. I examine the problematic relationship of those being interviewed with the end-of-life issue and also the sense of guilt which is generated by the awareness of crimes that were committed. Aktion T4 was not a crime committed outside the national borders, nor a crime that extended beyond the private sphere to the “others.” Instead, it existed within the most central and intimate place of Nazi culture: the family.

Key-words: *Nazi euthanasia program; transgenerational trauma; racial hygiene; Social Darwinism; eugenics*

I. Introduction

In 1935, barely two years after Hitler and the National Socialist party came to power, the Office for Racial Politics sponsored the making of a short film directed by Carl C. Hartmann entitled *Das Erbe* (*The Heritage*). In a very effective visual way, the film shows the mechanism by which the struggle for survival takes effect, selecting the strongest individuals of different species: “Even animals pursue a racial policy!,” the young assistant of the scientist exclaims, while he explains the meaning of the video, showing it to his colleagues. The short film’s narrative follows images of individuals faces, deformed by various diseases, to show that by allowing weak elements to survive, man has encouraged the reproduction of pathology in society. The work is particularly interesting because although it was not designed to educate and prepare people for the killing of “ballast existences,” and “useless eaters,”¹ it shows how nature’s selection includes, among animals, not only the discrimination and persecution of weaker individuals, but also their death. As such, the film could be considered the symbol of the moment of transition in which the eugenics theory married the totalitarian politics of National Socialism and bent to its advantage the reflections that for decades had powered the international debate about “racial hygiene.”

What the Nazis termed *Aktion T4* was a euthanasia program officially started on August 18th, 1939. The registration operations for individuals with physical or mental handicaps were followed by the forced sterilization and transfer to clinics organized to kill people considered unworthy of life. In Kaufbeuren-Irsee, where one of the clinics used for the implementation of the program was located, the last killing took place on May 29th, 1945, three weeks after the end of World War II.

I worked on the research project “Lebensunwertes Leben: The Memory of *Aktion T4* in the Victims’ Families” in Berlin, a city where historical memory is a legacy with an easily perceivable weight. Although almost all the buildings have been rebuilt following the bombing and the fall of the wall, there is a clear feeling of being surrounded by recent history and that around every corner of the city lies either a memory or a memorial. These different memories do not seem to be isolated, but in dialogue with each other, almost in competition. They fight, they try to make space on the scene and stand out in the eyes of today’s spectators.

What do the Germans of today know about the *Aktion T4*? Why do they find it so hard to relate to this crime, compared to the others committed by Nazi Germany? Why in German public libraries is it possible to find entire

¹ Karl Binding, and Alfred Hoche, *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens, ihr Maß und ihre Form* (Leipzig: Verlag von Feliz Meiner, 1922), 55.

sections dedicated to the Holocaust, but only a few shelves on the *Aktion T4* program?

My work does not claim to give definitive answers or to provide data that can define the matter conclusively, but to illustrate the mechanisms through which the memory of the actions that led to the “merciful death” of about 70,000 “lives unworthy of life” has been preserved in the private and family dimension and how and with what characteristics it has been handed down from one generation to the next.

The story of Jörg’s family, which I will summarize in the second part of this paper, well represents all the other stories I have collected. It can be considered a specific example of mechanisms active in the transmission of a trauma that is a part of the difficult elaboration process of the National Socialist past, which involved the entire German society from the post-war period to today. Whether the will to put an end to one’s life or the lives of those who are considered without a chance of recovery is legitimate or not, it is a problem that has aroused interest since ancient times, and the debate concerning the possibility of making euthanasia practices legal is still going on. Focussing on German society for this particular debate, that began centuries ago, and in particular on Nazi Germany, undoubtedly makes this case worthy of interest.

II. Philosophical and scientific context

In his opening speech at the Sociological Society Symposium at the London University in May 1904, Francis Galton used a fairy tale as a device to define the scope of his eugenic theory:

If we imagined that all the animals in a zoo had capacity for thought and speech and, asking a wise creature among them to collect the opinions of all others to create a system of absolute morality, we would be faced with a vastness of too many different conceptions, given from the different points of view of each species compared to the others (predators, prey, parasites).²

All animals, in the opinion of Galton, however, would agree in considering it more desirable to be healthy than sick, strong rather than weak, well-structured than the opposite. As such, he concludes: “The aim of eugenics is to represent each class or sect by its best specimens; to leave them to work out their common civilization in their own way.”³ It was Charles Darwin,

² Francis Galton, *Essays in Eugenics* (London: The Eugenics Education Society, 1909), 35-36.

³ *Ibid.*

cousin of Galton, who combined the concepts of “species,” “adaptation,” and “evolution,” in his theory of evolution of the species and natural selection.

Darwin had observed that among individuals of the same species, there could be noticed similarities for various factors, and he had concluded that in each population there could be found some differences inherited from the successive generations, but not produced by the surrounding environment. As claimed by his theory, species evolve in the long run, thanks to the action of natural selection that restrains the indiscriminate multiplication of individuals, leaving only the specimens that have reached a better adaptation, and therefore live and reproduce better, to survive.

The new members of the species that have appeared in a generation are selected by the environment itself. Evolution proceeds randomly, according to Darwin, but is directed by the action of natural selection as influenced by environmental factors. In his writings, there is never any reference to eugenics, a term that did not yet exist when he was alive. His theory did not foresee or theorize the need for any intervention outside the action of nature’s selection and there was in his theory no vision that could be defined racially, in any way. As Darwin himself wrote: “He blamed a mixture of ignorance and self-interest for the common belief that the distinct races of man were separable species. Has not the white man, who has debased his nature by making slave of his fellow Black, often wished to consider him as another animal.”⁴ However, it was precisely from the study of his work that Galton founded the new science of the *eu* – meaning “good” – and *genos* – meaning “lineage:” *eugenics*.

A turning point in 1900 was the rediscovery of Mendel’s studies on heredity, conforming to which the physical characteristics, evident in a generation, would be the result of the union of the parents’ traits. Also in this case, it was Galton who took the next step, introducing a concept that we could define as “ancestral inheritance.” Traits would be understood as hereditary, not resulting only from a mix of the parents’ characteristics, but from those handed down by all previous generations.

Recall that the power of selection of a species’ characteristics is for Darwin natural, therefore it is determined by a slow variation by the same nature; an evolutionary law that through numerous variations, proceeds step by step, modifying and increasing the adaptation of the species’ specimens in relation to the surrounding environment. Is it possible, Galton asked himself, to intervene in this transmission of hereditary traits, or can one be only passive in Nature’s hands, without the power to modify what we have received as a gift from it? If we improved our habits, would our children then have better habits,

⁴ Jonathan Howard, *Darwin: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 182.

inherited from us? Galton concluded, “What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly.”⁵

Referring to Galton, in order to take charge of directing the action of nature, and bring about a correction to the evolution of the human species, society would have to intervene. As he wrote: “If unsuitable marriages from the eugenic point of view were banned socially, or even regarded with the unreasonable disfavour which some attach to cousin-marriages, very few would be made.”⁶ This power of intervention is not a simple possibility, but “it is a duty to humanity” and should be exercised in the most advantageous way for the human species, creating a society in which the qualities that are most necessary can produce better and individuals more capable “to refuse representatives of criminals, and of others whom it rates as undesirable.”⁷ In this point of view, the individual has no value of uniqueness and his existence has the sole purpose of contributing to the progress of the species.

The biological vision of the organism as a set of different organs is thus translated into the social sphere, and goes to define a system-community that has its own life and that, with the advent of Nazism, will also take on a sacred value. The idea that mankind divides into races is certainly linked to scientific and ideological development and has been a specific cultural trait for centuries, becoming the basis of the claim of superiority by the West, “white,” world. The meeting of Europe with non-European populations produced a comparison largely based on the observation and description of the physical characteristics of indigenous peoples, and the subsequent belief that these were linked to alleged corresponding psychological-behavioural characteristics.

As the world slowly approached modernity, the concept of race varied and took on different meanings according to the historical phase. Race marked the reassuring boundaries of the distances to be maintained in the phase of conquering the new worlds. Race allowed the increase of the claim of superiority at a point in time when ancient systems had been destroyed. Race put itself at the service of scientific progress, which led to the birth of the concept of nation, and embodied the process in which human beings were ordered and classified according to degrees of inferiority and superiority.

The concept of race slowly took a political-biological connotation, moving from the cultural to the physical sphere. Of great importance was the moment when the idea that humanity divides into races overlapped with the creation of the national states and the birth of the different nationalisms; the

⁵ Francis Galton, “Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 10, no. 1 (1904): 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷ Galton, *Essays in Eugenics*, 37.

biological component was placed side by side with what we could call *spiritual*, in line with which every people would have been a bearer of a specific “Geist des Volkes,” the Spirit that crossed the centuries and inhabited every individual belonging to the national community. If the homeland is, especially for German thinkers, the way in which history implements the divine plan, the “Volksgeist” is then the instrument that makes this realization possible.

The theories that developed from the Darwinist reflection, referred to as Social Darwinism, are distant from the work of the English naturalist, and take on different forms and meanings in every historical and geographical context. Starting from the principles of natural selection and struggle for survival, albeit with distinctly different political implications, they applied the results to the human community with reflections far distant from the conceptions of the English naturalist. These doctrines were born when, in the wake of industrial development, the differences between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat became more pronounced, the importance of the natural sciences and their technical applications grew and new ideas on the action of man began to spread in the social context and in history.

In Germany, it was the doctor and naturalist Ernst Haeckel who first spread the theory of evolution and the struggle for survival, through his own studies and theories. He did so by completely distorting Darwin’s thought and theorized, starting from the reading of the evolutionary law, his fundamental biogenetic law, in accordance with which the individual development of the embryos would be a recapitulation of the evolutionary development of the whole species: “ontogenesis recapitulates the phylogeny.”⁸ His philosophical reading of the whole world, called *Monism*, brought all forms of creation back to a single substance, both material and spiritual at the same time, and quickly took the form of a religion when he founded the *Monisten Bund*. It is interesting to note that in the opinion of Haeckel, suicide was not a reprehensible act, but rather a redemption.

The theme was of great interest in mid-nineteenth-century Germany. Stressing the spread of hereditary diseases and the ever-increasing number of poor people, the German doctor wondered about the possibility of helping those who, affected by an incurable disease, would express their desire to end their suffering and could die. At the base of the formation of eugenic thought and common to most of the different currents, it was the concept of “degeneration,” which began to assume ever greater importance in the historical moment in which, after the development of the industrial society, the ruling classes became aware of the conditions of economic and hygienic misery in which the popular classes had to live.

⁸ Ernst Haeckel, *Generelle Morphologie II: Allgemeine Entwicklungsgeschichte der Organismen* (Berlin: Georg Reimer Verlag, 1866), 372.

Once again, the basis on which many theorists built their own speculation was the work of Darwin, who, although he had again no direct connection with subsequent theories, perfectly embodied the role of starting point. As J. Howard wrote:

The question is simply, when does a variation earn its characterization as 'useful' or 'harmful,' when does an individual earn its characterization as 'fit' or 'unfit?' The right answer must be, after selection. Since the outcome of Darwin did not make this point entirely clear, it was perhaps because he saw the whole argument for natural selection that was to involve a paradox, in that it is the destruction of individuals which is to condition for adaptive or constructive change. If, however, he labelled the variations to be selected as 'useful.' Then the paradox seemed to go away. There is no paradox, of course. Whether they vary or not, because of the struggle for existence.⁹

As Galton hoped, the eugenics theory spread "into the national conscience, like a new religion,"¹⁰ and when the first International Eugenics Congress¹¹ was opened in 1912, the scientific community had already accepted Galton's new religion, recognizing it as full scientific legitimacy.

From this moment on, the parallel between science and religion characterized the spread of this new faith and shaped its aesthetic vision. If man replaces God and becomes creator of himself, then science takes the form of a "religious temple." In the same way as traditional religion, even the new scientific faith founded by Galton promised perfect and eternal immortality, capable of overcoming even the theological promise of the continuation of life in the kingdom of heaven. The immortality promised by eugenics was the creation of perfect individuals. Just as eternal life, as believed by Christian theology, would have redeemed the pain and suffering of the earthly one, then the eugenics faith promised to overcome the degeneration of the present times by promising the arrival of a healthy future. "The language of eugenics was, from the outset, situated within the climate of the late nineteenth-century interaction between religion and science."¹² Born of the century of scientific dynamism and in opposition to religious dogma, the eugenic ideal assumed the appearance of

⁹ Howard, 89-90.

¹⁰ Galton, "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims," 50.

¹¹ Over 400 participants took part in the Congress, inaugurated in London.

¹² Marius Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 15.

a biological theology and both Europe and the United States welcomed this new theory with open arms, concentrating their attention on different areas of the problem.

What in Germany was defined as “Rassen und Gesellschafts-biologie,” was the union of the new nineteenth-century science, anthropology, with social philosophy, eugenics and a particular reading of Darwin’s doctrines, and it had as its object of study the improvement of the race, elevated to the role of main nucleus of every social doctrine. The founder of this new social science was the physician, biologist and eugenicist Alfred Ploetz. He coined the term “Rassenhygiene” and directed attention to the two parallel fields of study of the improvement of the race and the prevention of degeneration. The new discipline in fact stood as the union of social science and hereditary biology, and conceived the whole society as a single body, whose preservation had to have priority over the individual’s life. The individual was not granted to have a value per se, but only in relation to the community. Without this conception, it would have been difficult to postulate the will to delegate to the State the choice of individuals to be suppressed and those to be multiplied.

The question of eliminating the unsuitable would be the central theme of German eugenicists’ thinking, and also the guiding thread in the construction of the subsequent totalitarian ideology. The connection between the collection of statistical data on cranial conformations and on the color of the hair and eyes, by the German Anthropological Society, in 1871 and those of “racial data” made by the Nazis decades later, is evident. Following a well-traced path by the theories of numerous scholars of different backgrounds, National Socialism became the first European government to make racial hygiene a topic of national politics¹³ thanks to the previous decade of thought and attention given to the legalization of euthanasia.

III. The memory of the Aktion T4

In the last chapter of his *Die Belasteten*,¹⁴ Aly Götz recounts an instance that took place in 1983, when 192 funerary urns, containing the ashes of victims of the National Socialist euthanasia program, were found in a cellar inside a cemetery near Konstanz, never claimed by the families. The urns have been buried more than forty years later by the authority of the municipality.

¹³ Georg L. Mosse, *Il razzismo in Europa. Dalle origini all’Olocausto*, trans. L. De Felice (Bari: Laterza, 2007), 91.

¹⁴ Götz Aly, *Die Belasteten. Euthanasie 1939–1945. Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2013), 276.

This story can be taken as a paradigm of how a very large number of patients have been killed in a general indifference, without the interest of any member of their families about their fate in life and even in later years. Aly Götz shows us that the bureaucratic apparatus of the clinics was not able, for one patient out of four, to establish who the close relatives were and where they resided.

However, even among the remaining three out of four families who were therefore warned, there was not necessarily an interest. Many other urns have certainly remained in the cellars of many German cemeteries for decades, and perhaps still today, they rest in the darkness of some rooms. Though for the transfer of minors it was always necessary to have written authorization from the family, for adults it was not necessary for authorities to warn family members in advance.

The doctors who presented to the parents the possibility of subjecting their children to risky therapies had often exaggerated the possibility of positive success, and therefore in many cases it cannot be said that the relatives were really able to understand what would have happened, in the same way as the families of adult patients, who only became aware of transfers from one clinic to another when the transfer had already taken place.

The entire structure of the forced euthanasia program had been built so that nothing could leak to the outside, and consequently with the aim of making the space of personal responsibility unstable, allowing (if that was possible) that the families of the patients should not ever come face to face with the truth. However, the “secret” was somehow revealed. News of the killing of patients spread among the population and in the summer of 1941 the operations were officially interrupted. It, however, continued, in a decentralized way, until the end of the war and beyond, as we have seen. Jörg’s story is an example of how the memory of these events has remained in the family dimension with much pain, many difficulties and a lot of unresolved feelings.

To be able to identify the traumatic mechanisms with which memories have been handed down, it must always be kept in mind that the value that the German culture attributed to the family had, at the time, very different characteristics and nuances from those of today, and defined, a different concept of identity.

The trauma analyzed concerns actions carried out by previous generations of my interviewee, who was not aware of the history of the great uncle killed in the *Aktion T4* program. After having encountered this family secret, he tried to reconstruct for the first time the series of events that occurred to this relative he never knew.

Jörg was born in 1977, has a degree in history and works in Berlin as an archivist. Alois Zähringer, his great-uncle, was born on September 20th, 1921, in Bleichheim, Baden-Württemberg. On August 9th, 1929, he was admitted to the St. Joseph Catholic institute, in Herten, with the diagnosis of epilepsy and profound dementia. He remained there until August 20th, 1940, when he was transferred to the Emmendingen psychiatric center, an intermediate stage of the T4 program. Eighteen days after his arrival, on September 6th, 1940, Alois was taken to Grafeneck, where he was killed on arrival.

Jörg did not have a good relationship with his paternal grandparents, the relatives of Alois. During the interview, he emphasizes how the victim's sister, his grandmother, was a woman full of hate:

The relationship to the parents of my father were always very distant. My grandmother on my father's side (the sister of the victim) was a woman with a lot of hate. She and her husband (my grandfather) were not heartfelt, they were bitter people, they didn't like to talk about personal things, their lives or feelings.¹⁵

When the woman died, Jörg's father dreamed of hearing her still alive in the coffin, and of someone jumping on it to not let her come out:

When my grandmother died in 1993 my father felt relieved. He dreamed that his dead mother would be in the coffin and trying to escape because she was not really dead. In his dream my father jumped on the coffin until it was quiet inside and he was sure she couldn't escape.¹⁶

Jörg was a curious child and tried, during his childhood, to ask the grandparents about the Nazi period, even wanting to know if his grandfather had committed crimes, unlike many of his peers. The father's interest in history and current affairs has certainly facilitated the breaking of the taboo present in German society, creating the space and the possibility for a generational exchange, often unthinkable in other German families.

When I asked him to tell me on what occasion and from whom he had known of the existence of his great-uncle, he used the verb "discover." It was a discovery, even if casual, that he came across when asking his grandmother for help to reconstruct the family tree.

¹⁵ Jörg W., Personal Interview realized by Erika Silvestri, Berlin, November 2018.

¹⁶ Ibid.

From the woman's words, he learned that Karl Friedrich, her younger brother, died when he was still a child. Searching for documents at the registry office, however, Jörg discovered that Karl Friedrich had never existed: The boy's real name seemed to be Alois, and he did not appear to have died as a child.

I discovered the fate of my great uncle by coincidence. When I was 12 years old I was interested in family history and I did some genealogical research. At the begin I asked my grandparents about their siblings and parents and grandparents. I wanted to draw a family tree and needed this kind of information. My grandmother told me, that she was born in 1913 in Bleichheim, that she had several siblings, Oskar, Karl Friedrich and Anna Zäzilia. I asked for the dates of birth and death. She didn't know them all. Karl Friedrich, she told me was younger than her and died as a baby (or small child). She couldn't know that I wrote letters to the Standesamt in her birth town and asked there for the birth certificate and death certificate. They answered me that there is no Karl Friedrich Zähringer, my grandmother must have been confused, his name was Alois, he was born in 1921 (so 8 years younger than my grandmother). They also told me that he didn't die as a baby, but that on his birth certificate is a note regarding his death. Unfortunately, I could not read this note. I only could read "1940" and a place like "Grafenruck," "Grafeneck," but I didn't know where it is.¹⁷

Incredulous, Jörg asked for explanations from his grandmother, who seemed then to remember other details: perhaps her little brother was sick, perhaps he lived in a hospital.

I asked my grandmother and she seemed to be surprised about what I had discovered. The only thing she admitted was, that he was kind of sick and had sometimes "attacks" and that he lived in an hospital. More information I was not able to get from her. Only one year later in November 1990 I read in the local newspaper an article, that in Grafeneck a memorial site was inaugurated for the victims of the Nazis who were murdered because they were disabled or handicapped. Only then I started to understand and went on with my research.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Although my father was a teacher for history and also interested in the Nazi time he never had heard from Grafeneck before. He knew, that handicapped and disabled people were murdered but he didn't know anything concrete about it.¹⁸

Intrigued by the strange behavior of his grandmother and determined to shed some light, Jörg made the decision to undertake research. The initial failure discouraged him for a few years, but he did not lose all his interest, until he decided to enroll in the faculty of history in Berlin.

When I was 12 years old, I found out the existence of Alois and only one year later, in 1990, I understood why he died in Grafeneck, after I read by coincidence a newspaper article about the memorial site in Grafeneck. I contacted the "Samariterheim" in Grafeneck and asked for further information. They told me that all the documents were destroyed by the Nazis in WW 2 and that they can't give me further information. They recommended a small monography about Grafeneck and I bought that, and I thought that's the end of my research, because as they said, the Nazis destroyed all the other material. I lost my interest. In 1996, I had finished the Gymnasium, I continued during my civilian service with my genealogical research and suddenly I found an important document: in the burial register [see Image 1] I discovered an entry, that Alois was buried in his hometown in Bleichheim, with information about his official date of death and cause of death and with the information that he lived before in Josefsanstalt Herten. So, I had a new trace. I contacted Herten, they told me from when to when he lived in Herten. And they told me that he was deported on August 20, 1940 to Emmendingen, before being deported to Grafeneck. So, I contacted the psychiatry in Emmendingen and they had also one document about him. I visited Herten and Emmendingen – and also Grafeneck, several times –, because I wanted to see these *sites* with my own eyes. I made a step and contacted the only half-sister of my grandmother who was still alive, Margarete.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

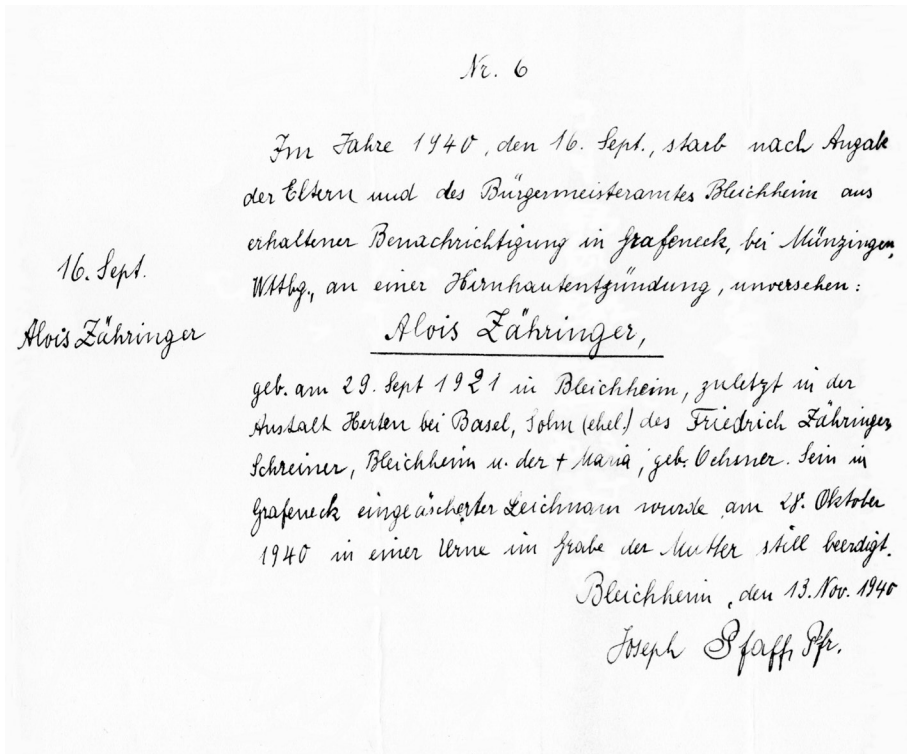


Image 1

It was Margarete herself who revealed to him a decisive detail: Alois would have been born healthy and his disease could have been caused by a fall, while Jörg's grandmother was holding him in her arms.

She told me, that Alois was healthy when he was born, that my grandmother when she took care for him as a babysitter, was not careful enough and he fell down on the floor and from that day on he was disabled. I don't know if the story is true, it can also be that this is another fairy tale in my family, to keep the family "clean" it was not a genetic disease, it was just an accident. Only now I found in Herten information about his diagnosis [see Image 2] and a description of his disease: *Angeborener Schwachsinn* (inherent idiocy) mit *Epilepsie* (epilepsy) und *Seelenstörung* (mental disorder).²⁰

²⁰ Ibid.

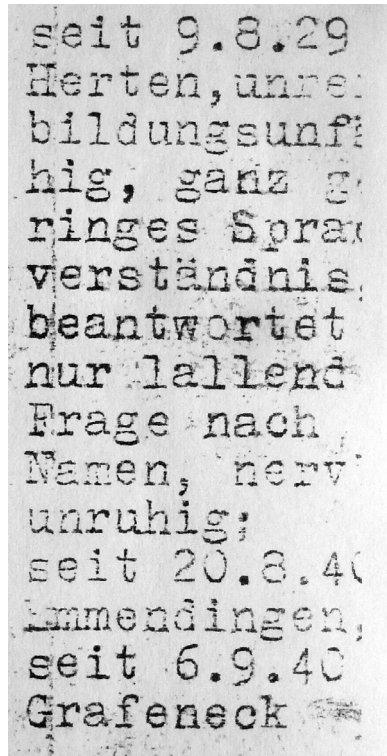


Image 2

Margarete kept a photograph in which Alois also appeared. But the child is apart, far from the rest of the family, it is almost impossible to find him [see Image 3]. Significantly, there are no other pictures of him, in the family's archive. Jörg defines the discovery of this family secret as something extraordinary:

At the begin I was more fascinated that I found out a family secret as a 12/13 years old boy. When I moved to Berlin and studied history I put my focus immediately on the Nazi time and the Holocaust. For me it was very clear from the start that I can't deal with the crimes of the Nazis in an academic way if I ignore what had happened in my own family. More and more I also felt that it is my obligation for Alois to remember him. That's the only thing I can do for him. The Nazis murdered him, my family collaborated in that way that they made him forgotten, he didn't exist any longer. I had to go on with the research to bring him back to the memory, back to my family, back to life. I'm aware that this is only possible on a symbolical way,

because he was murdered and he remains dead. But that's the only thing I can do for him.²¹



Image 3

All my interviewees have expressed, although in different forms and at different times, a tenacious desire to break the taboo of silence concerning National Socialism, trying whenever possible to question their grandparents or older relatives about their memories of the war period. This tenacity seems to be the manifestation of a strong inter-generational tension and this is even more evident considering that in Germany, from the post-war period to the present, the inter-generational dialogue between grandparents and grandchildren was almost non-existent, to the point of becoming a tangible sign of a social break.

When I questioned German acquaintances about why it is still considered so difficult to talk about Nazism in the family circle, I was told that “it is / was not the case,” “it is not a sign of good education,” “one does

²¹ Ibid.

not have the right to put elderly people in the position of having to justify themselves, without knowing what we would have done in their place,” and “speaking of this in the family is considered a taboo.” Why, then, was Jörg the first to break the family taboo, forcing the rest of his family to confront their own heavy past?

In my opinion it was precisely the connection of these stories familiar with the *Aktion T4* that allowed the last generations to break the heavy caesura present in German society. They discovered they are exceptions – and they discovered it by coming across a family secret – because having a direct link with the world of the victims, they are not tied only to that of the executioners, like the other Germans.

Although in different ways, everyone claimed to have perceived in their families something undeclared and unresolved, a sort of Freudian emotional process in place, capable of generating complex sensations, coming from a past event that they neither knew nor knew to explain, yet they clearly felt. To come across this “secret-non-secret,” which the family does not want to talk about, but seems to have disseminated clues to highlight its existence, is the younger generation, that of the grandchildren or great-grandchildren of the victims. Strengthened by their temporal distance from the tragic events, they had the strength to want to understand what was being silenced. Hidden in a heavy silence, the closest relatives of the victims have instead tried, with time, to forget the fate of their loved ones.

No family unit came out unscathed from the will of the youngest to reconstruct the history of the victims. Relationships between the members of the same nucleus have been altered, for better or for worse. Those who were tied in a particular way, now feel even more bound; those who had a difficult relationship now have a greater distance. The fact that these changes have occurred is complex to explain. The factors involved are multiple and closely linked to each other, to the point of creating a dense network of pain and silence, similar and different at the same time for each family unit.

In the text *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens*,²² psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich explain how thousands of German citizens who had been enthusiastic supporters of Hitler, developed psychological defenses after the war to respond to guilt, shame and remorse. Among these defenses, the most notable was the dissociation of conscience, which allowed the crisis to be overcome without a real awareness of it.

²² Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (München: Piper, 1967).

“Trauern,” to grieve, is necessary, Mitscherlich tells us, for a healthy mental evolution.²³ For Germany, it was not possible. There was no time, it was not the case, and legitimate mourning could not exist in the eyes of the world for people who had committed crimes so heinous, that they redefined “crimes against humanity.”

IV. Conclusions

Talking to the Germans about the euthanasia program implemented during the Third Reich is still very difficult. This is because it is linked to a very problematic relationship that many people have with the concept of “the end of life,” as well as a sense of guilt that was generated by the awareness of the crime committed. But why is the argument still perceived as one of the most difficult to deal with?

The killing of the handicapped and the mentally ill, (among which many were depressed and misunderstood) is perhaps the crime that most of all, in my opinion, managed to fit into the private sphere of the citizens of the Nazi Germany, breaking up the emotional balance and family dynamics in the name of the purification of the “Aryan race.”

If it is true that man is a social animal, then it is precisely feelings that bring him closer or away from other human beings, that define him.

As is in evidence from the story of Jörg’s family, and other stories that I have collected during my research, there was never an external enemy that could be pointed out from a safe distance, an enemy from whom one could be disinterested, but fathers and mothers, and sons and daughters, were sacrificed by a will that was stronger than any bond of blood.

This is perhaps the scariest face of *Aktion T4*, the one that reflects our ability to hate, in the name of any faith, even a part of ourselves.

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²³ Mitscherlich, Chapter 1.

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